**Mr. Ingalls’ Class**

My story begins in the fall of 1980 as a tiny freshman trying to find a way to stand out or merely survive in the masses of Mount Vernon High. The halls were endless tunnels; a hidden map tucked in a spiral notebook provided the only key how to weave around from class to class. The only refuge in the overwhelming sea of upperclassmen was the freshmen quad. That was where all the freshmen lockers lined up. It was the only area in the entire school where the freshmen could relish in their glory. It was a sea of Calvin Klein jeans, add-a-bead necklaces, converse high tops, t-shirts and non-stop chatter about rumors heard about upperclassmen or teachers. I was lucky to have had older siblings, so I shared the stories I had heard about some of the teachers. Ninth grade English meant only two things: Mr. Ingalls or Mrs. Swarth.

Mrs. Swarth looked to be around 80, reeked of cigarettes, and gasped while speaking as if her lungs had to fight to get the words out. My brothers had Mrs. Swarth, so I heard the tales about her class. Legend had it she took off her shoe and smacked a student with it, she grabbed students’ papers and crumpled them up before throwing them into the waste basket, and she had students share their writing only to ridicule them. At Mount Vernon High, Mrs. Swarth was pretty much the only teacher that even the upperclassmen feared.

Then there was Mr. Ingalls. He wore jeans every day, his long sleeve shirts were always rolled up just below his elbow, and he had a sexy mustache. He was young and cool. He was known around the school for his “unorthodox” teaching methods. Students actually came out of his class laughing and enjoying Shakespeare. At Mount Vernon, Mr. Ingalls was “it.” Mr. Ingalls’ classroom was catty-corner to my locker. I remember stealing glances my first day of school, trying to get a glimpse of him. Of course I only had to wait for lunch, because I hit the jackpot freshman year. All my brothers’ horror stories vanished when I opened that letter from MVHS and skimmed my teachers. No Swarth! Hallelujah, I could side step my brothers’ shadows for once. As I walked into his classroom after lunch that first day, I wondered if all the hype was going to be overrated. Five minutes into his class, I knew I would never forget Mr. Ingalls.

He was rather small for a man, probably only about 5’11” and 165 pounds. He stood in front of the classroom smiling as we walked in, welcoming us. There was no seating chart, no assigned seats; we were free to sit wherever we chose. I remember thinking how comfortable and confident he looked. Maybe it was because I was dealing with new glasses and braces. I despised my glasses and only wore them when it was absolutely necessary. I would tuck them in my pencil case and hope that a blur across the room wouldn’t need my attention.

That day I plopped down in the second row right in front of Mr. Ingalls. He began by reading an excerpt out of our 9th grade grammar book’s introduction. His voice was rich, but what he was saying was unintelligible. We just stared at him. After a few sentences, he raised his head up and looked at us in a perplexing way. As if to say, “You get this, right?” We continued to stare at him. Then he slid his wire-rim glasses out of his pocket, waved them in the air, and threw the book on his desk. The loud thud made us jump in our seats. He had everyone’s attention. Then he did something no other English teacher had ever done, he waved his hands as if waving off traffic and said, “I tell you what, let’s just forget about that book for awhile. Let’s just take a few minutes to focus on putting our thoughts and ideas down on paper.” We stared back. No grammar book, that was insane. Every year since 5th grade that grammar book had been force fed to us. “Pull out a pencil and a sheet of paper and let’s do some free writing.” We stared back again. Jimmy Taylor raised his hand in the back and asked, “What do you want us to write about?” He laughed and responded with, “Whatever you want.” Gasps, huh’s, and are you kidding me’s rang out from all corners of the classroom. The concept of free writing was not only new to us, but unthinkable. No other teacher had ever asked us to write whatever we wanted. All prior writing assignments came with a topic or purpose. This guy was mad!

At the end of ninth grade English, I realized that Mr. Ingalls was indeed an exceptional teacher. Without even referring to my grammar book, I learned how to take control of my thoughts and express them clearly. His concept of “free writing” and expressing words without worrying about the confines of grammar allowed me to write more freely and openly then I ever had before. I made sure my mom scheduled my orthodontist appointments during other classes. I was hooked on Mr. Ingalls and writing.